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Minister for Senior Citizens
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Speech Notes

Grey Power AGM Christchurch 12 April

It is my pleasure to join you at your annual general meeting. Thank you for inviting me. I would like to acknowledge your organisation's office holders and board members.

For years Grey Power has been working with key people in government to see that the collective voice of the senior community is heard. It is a testament to your leadership that Grey Power has this kind of influence.

Critical to that influence is one of Grey Power's goals and that is, "to be non-aligned with any political party, and to present a strong united lobby to all Parliament and statutory bodies on matters affecting New Zealanders".

In light of that, I was surprised to see Grey Power announcing last week it would be working alongside Labour and the Greens to hold a nationwide investigation into the state of aged care.

As Health Minister Tony Ryall pointed out immediately after this announcement, last year an Auditor General's report strongly criticised aged residential care under the previous Labour Government. The National Government is now sorting out the nine years of neglect.

We have increased funding for better nursing supervision, introduced spot auditing, put in third party checks on the auditing agencies, and made more information available to residents and their families by publishing audit results.

In New Zealand, one million baby boomers start turning 65 from next year. As our population ages the role of Grey Power will become even more important and its

influence will only remain strong if the organisation maintains political neutrality to best represent all its membership.

As there has been some recent media coverage of this investigation, I thought it was important I talked about it first. The rest of my speech will cover other areas that I know of concern to Grey Power, as well as outline the things this Government is doing and my priorities as Minister for Senior Citizens.

We must show New Zealand that ageing is a positive thing.

I have three priorities to champion positive ageing: employment of mature workers; changing attitudes about ageing; and helping to protect the rights and interests of older people by raising awareness of elder abuse and neglect. And I will go into more detail about these.

But before I do that, I'd like to address some concerns Grey Power has raised with me.

I'm sure you're all keen to hear about what's going on with transport.

The Ministry of Transport's review of free off-peak travel with the SuperGold Card isn't about revoking entitlements in any way – it's about finding a fair balance of costs between public transport operators and Government.

The Prime Minister said on TV One's Breakfast Show that he is committed to continuing the Card's transport services. The Minister of Transport, as well, has confirmed that the current free off-peak transport scheme will not be altered in any way.

The review was put in place to ensure a fair balance between taxpayer dollars and operator contribution.

Continuing on the subject of transport, I know there is some concern about the loss of courses for older drivers. The Ministry of Transport found that the Safe with Age courses did not reach enough older drivers. The decision to cease funding of the

courses is a result of Government's current focus on value for money, and more cost-effective alternatives are being explored.

The Office for Senior Citizens is working with the Automobile Association Driver Education Foundation to develop safety tips for older drivers. These are expected to be distributed through AA centres and directly to AA members by August this year.

After a particularly horrific Easter weekend on the roads, I'm sure we can all agree that keeping everyone on the road safe is a priority. Fitness to drive is a concern. You all know that drivers must renew their licence once they turn 75 and 80, and then every two years after that. Part of this assessment includes a visit to the doctor.

This isn't a personal affront; it's simply a way to ensure that New Zealand roads are safe and that you are safe. Sometimes a health problem exists without anyone knowing about it. Without proper testing, the problem may not be discovered until something tragic happens on the road. This is something we want to avoid so all drivers have confidence.

Fortunately, people can combine the request for the medical certificate that they need to renew a driver licence with their regular doctor's appointment. Testing for road fitness doesn't exist to hinder a person's independence; it exists to keep everyone safe.

As Minister I am discovering many interesting aspects to our population ageing. As New Zealanders grow older, they are doing more than previous generations. We're slowly breaking stereotypes and showing an undeniable and growing contribution to this country.

Of course, the most obvious contribution to society is by bolstering the nation's economy. We need to think about ways to support the employment of mature workers, expand commercial opportunities to mature consumers, and boost the senior tourist market share – both domestically and internationally.

New Zealand has one of the highest labour participation rates for older people among OECD countries. This makes for a more productive economy; a more varied and skilled workforce; and most of all, it makes for a more open-minded and inclusive society.

The participation rate for older workers increased last year, reaching 43.6 per cent for the year to December 2009. This was higher than the 42.7 per cent for the year to December 2008 and up strongly from a decade ago, when the rate was 30.1 per cent for the year to December 1999.

By encouraging employers to offer flexible working arrangements, mature workers are rightfully valued and employers gain and retain experienced staff members. Experience is priceless.

Smart businesses are recognising and responding to the demands of an ageing nation. They're creating innovative products and services to appeal to this increasing group of consumers. They recognise that older people are getting savvier when it comes to using technology, both to keep in touch with family members and to get information. The Ministry of Social Development's Senior Services website (www.seniors.msd.govt.nz), for example, has seen a 74 per cent increase in the number of people accessing information since April 2009.

Older people are also using the internet to discover exciting new places. Many older people choose to spend their retirement fulfilling lifelong dreams of travel – both within New Zealand and overseas. It's a fact that older people are significant contributors to the tourist industry, both at home and overseas. Tourism in New Zealand can also benefit from older travellers from around the world choosing our beautiful country as their dream holiday destination.

Of course, you don't have to travel any further than your neighbourhood to make the most of retirement, if that's what you choose. Some older people who choose not to carry on in the paid workforce are keen to work with younger generations in a mentoring role. Programmes that utilise the skills of older people to assist families' manage budgets and learn life skills, and where older people mentor children in schools, are

creating communities that bridge generations. They're changing attitudes about how different generations relate to each other.

It's only once we learn about and appreciate each other that change happens. It's communication among communities that generates that change. It also helps to have cohesion among central, regional and local government to get out a consistent message and trustworthy information.

I'm pleased to see that government agencies are working a lot more effectively to do this. We all know that good local government policies make the greatest difference to the quality of older people's lives.

A prime example of a coordinated community approach is Neighbourhood Support New Zealand. This group works closely with the police and many other community organisations to reduce crime, improve safety, and prepare for emergencies and natural disasters..

On a much broader level, the recent tsunami alert and earthquakes in the Pacific have highlighted the vulnerability of older people and carers. I can't emphasise enough how important it is to be well prepared in case of an emergency and to have made a plan in advance. I've asked my officials in the Office for Senior Citizens and at the Ministry of Civil Defence and Emergency Management to work together to develop information for carers and seniors about what to do in a natural disaster. This should make a real difference and it will be distributed in the Civil Defence information pack.

Part of watching out for the safety of the older people in the community means speaking up when something's not right. It also means sharing the message of what to watch out for. I feel very strongly about preventing elder abuse and neglect in New Zealand. The best way to eliminate this abuse is to join forces with others who feel just as strongly.

As part of the It's Not OK campaign, a booklet was developed called *Take the Time... Value Older People*. It was created to share the message that all older people should be treated with respect and dignity – end of story. The booklet is simple and direct. It gives

a guide to identifying signs of elder abuse and provides information on what to do to get help.

I like to keep a copy of this booklet on-hand so that I can share this message. Working together, we can share this message with the whole of the country. Sometimes information is all a person needs to really make a difference and keep older people safe.

We're also working to ensure that Work and Income and Senior Services staff have the information they need so they know what to do if they have suspicions of abuse or neglect. My goal is that everyone in New Zealand knows how to spot elder abuse, and how they can deal with it. On World Elder Abuse and Neglect Awareness Day, 15 June this year, I will be emphasising the importance of working together to address this significant issue that needs to be talked about more publicly.

Positive ageing starts with citizens, their families and communities.

I think this is an interesting time to be a senior citizen. The active older people of today have a feeling of empowerment. They're part of healthy communities full of people who understand their worth and the power of their contribution.

Older people today have more options to choose from in the pursuit of a fulfilling life. People are living longer and are healthier than ever before. What's important is that they have the freedom to make the most of this.

Choice is a powerful thing. It could mean the choice to retire and take time to volunteer; the choice to work with members of younger generations to share hard-earned knowledge and wisdom; or the choice to continue working.

As a group advocating the rights of older people, we need to make all the choices known. We need to continue to support and strengthen these choices. For example, if employers work with their mature workers – offering flexible hours or part-time work – there are many benefits. Not only is more money injected into the economy, but it opens

conversation between generations of workers and paves the way towards personal fulfilment.

It's my belief that good communication is the best way to clear any misunderstanding. Only by talking to each other, and listening to each other's stories, can people of all generations begin to understand what each has been through. By vocalising the contributions of older people and making these opportunities evident we can dismantle the stereotype of an older person who won't so much as venture from their house.

Projections are that our older population will double by the year 2028. As this slowly happens year by year, Grey Power represents a growing proportion of the overall population. As I said earlier, your collective voice is becoming ever more important.

You can show New Zealand that every older person should be valued for the contributions they've made in the past, but even more importantly the contributions they make in the present.

There are some really exciting opportunities ahead. I look forward to seeing what we make of them.

Thank you.